

United States Department of Agriculture
Farm Service Agency

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

**Implementation of the
Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
for the State of North Carolina**

The United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency (FSA) has prepared a Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) to evaluate the environmental consequences associated with implementing the North Carolina Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) Agreement. The North Carolina CREP Agreement covers all or a part of 44 counties in North Carolina located within the Chowan, Neuse, and Tar Pamlico River Basins, as well as the B. Everett Jordan Reservoir Watershed.

Agriculture is the largest source of stream-use impacts in North Carolina. Of the 30 percent of stream miles impacted by non-point pollution throughout the state, agriculture likely impacts 65 percent. In addition, 60 percent of non-point pollution in estuarine areas is believed to come from agricultural land uses. The purpose of the North Carolina CREP is to enroll eligible, environmentally sensitive cropland in a program to enhance water quality and quantity by reducing runoff of sediments, nutrients, pesticides, and pathogens from agricultural sources. CREP is also intended to increase the water storage capacity of the applicable watersheds through wetland restoration measures and decreased fragmentation of riparian areas, grasslands, and forestland corridors.

The primary goal of the CREP Agreement is to provide an opportunity, through financial and technical assistance to eligible producers in the CREP area, to voluntarily establish wetland habitat, erosion controls, filter strips, buffers, wildlife habitat, grass waterways, and other approved practices that improve the water quality of agricultural runoff.

The objectives of the North Carolina CREP Agreement are to:

- restore and enhance riparian habitat corridors next to streams, drainage ditches, estuaries, wetlands, and other water courses by enrolling up to 85,000 acres of riparian forested buffers and grass filter strips;
- restore up to 15,000 acres of non-riparian wetlands either associated with drainage ditches or adjacent to primary fishery nursery areas to address impacts associated with drainage; and
- provide a mechanism to help farmers comply with the State of North Carolina's Neuse Nitrogen Reduction Rules and potential regulations or goals.

Preferred Alternative

The Preferred Alternative is also the Proposed Action (Alternative A). The Proposed Action assumes the implementation of the amended CREP Agreement (See Appendix B).

Alternative A targets up to 100,000 acres of land, including 85,000 acres of riparian and 15,000 acres of non-riparian wetlands, within the four watersheds included in the amended CREP Agreement. Alternative A would continue until the full funding of \$275 million is exhausted or until 100,000 acres are enrolled. Conservation Practices (CPs) in the four major watershed areas would focus on those stream segments or water bodies classified as nutrient-sensitive waters (NSW), which have experienced harmful algal blooms, reduced levels of oxygen, and increased fish kills, and have displayed other symptoms of stress and disease in the aquatic biota (NCDWQ 2005).

Reasons for Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

In consideration of the analysis documented in the PEA and the reasons outlined in this FONSI (below), the Preferred Alternative would not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The determination is based on the following:

1. The Preferred Alternative as outlined in the PEA would improve wildlife habitat, increase species viability, and improve wildlife-dependent recreation. The potential effects of implementation of the Preferred Alternative would be to improve wildlife resources, improve water quality, and provide flood damage reduction measures.
2. Potential beneficial and adverse impacts of implementing the Preferred Alternative have been fully considered within the PEA. No significant adverse direct or indirect effects were identified, based on the resource analyses provided in the PEA.. Adverse cumulative impacts are expected to be minor, as implementation of the Preferred Alternative would cause very little if any adverse impact on the area and the human environment.
3. The Preferred Alternative would not negatively affect public health or safety. Implementation of the Preferred Alternative would improve water quality, reduce damages from flooding, and improve wildlife resources and community wildlife-related economics in 44 counties.
4. The Preferred Alternative would not significantly affect any unique characteristics of parklands, prime farmlands wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.
5. The Preferred Alternative would not involve effects to the quality of the human environment that are likely to be highly controversial.
6. The Preferred Alternative would not impose or involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks.
7. The Preferred Alternative would not significantly affect current and future economic development.
8. The Preferred Alternative would not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The intended outcome of the Preferred Alternative is a significant reduction in the amount of nutrients and sedimentation entering water courses and estuaries, enhancement of habitat for a range of threatened and endangered species, and a decrease in excess pulses of freshwater in primary nursery areas.
9. The Preferred Alternative does not result in cumulative significant impacts when considered with other actions that also individually have insignificant impacts. The PEA discusses potential cumulative impacts of implementing the Preferred Alternative. Cumulative impacts of implementing the Preferred Alternative were determined to be not significant.
10. The Preferred Alternative would not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and it would not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.
11. The Preferred Alternative would not have adverse effects on threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat. In accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the effects of implementing the Preferred Alternative on threatened and endangered species and designated critical habitat were addressed in the PEA. Informal consultation with the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service was completed on a programmatic level. Further consultation would occur as necessary for individual contracts.
12. The Preferred Alternative does not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Determination

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and FSA's environmental regulations at 7 CFR part 799 implementing the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality, 40 CFR parts 1500-1508, I find that neither the Proposed Action nor the Alternative is a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, no environmental impact statement will be prepared.

Approved:

Signature

Date

Name

Title